

# Investigating Principal Autonomy in Public Schools: United Arab Emirates Case Study

Ahmed M. Alkaabi<sup>1</sup>, Eiman H. Alshehhi<sup>2</sup>

United Arab Emirates University

## Abstract

This qualitative study explores how school principals in United Arab Emirates public schools experience autonomy under the umbrella of the Emirates Schools Establishment (ESE). It aims to unveil the decision-making challenges principals face within the operational confines of a centralized governing establishment, and it seeks to identify solutions that improve autonomy practices. A single-case study design guided this research, and data were gathered from UAE public schools during 2022. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight school principals and two cluster managers (principal supervisors), and relevant documents were collected synchronously. The preliminary findings of this study derived from a cross-case analysis resulted in five emergent themes: (1) the executive management system hindering daily school operations; (2) recruiting school personnel; (3) the need for principal internship that assists them in exercising their autonomy; (4) regulating and adjusting financial matters; and (5) employing collaborative decision-making practices. This study provides several implications for policymakers, practices in the field of education, and further research. It contributes to the existing literature on the development of autonomy practices within the educational leadership landscape.

**Keywords:** centralization, decentralization, decision-making, leaders, leadership